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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10 YEARS AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION
TAGS: [KS](#) [KN](#) [PROG](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: ROK OPINION OF CHINA DRIVEN BY GOGURYEO ANXIETY

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Mt. Baekdu, known in China as Mt. Changbai, is considered in Korea to be a sacred mountain, containing the legendary foundation of the nation. This highest mountain in Korea (and Manchuria) has come to the fore for many South Koreans because they perceive Chinese economic, cultural, and infrastructure developments around the mountain as an attempt to claim the whole mountain as Chinese territory. The planned 2008 start of the Mt. Baekdu tours appears to be the most recent salvo of the ROK's effort to rebuff PRC claims to the area of the historic Goguryeo dynasty, including Mt. Baekdu, according to scholars at the Northeast Asian History Foundation. The fact that the tours were the first item sought for implementation from the October 3 North-South Summit Declaration indicates growing South Korean unease, both among the elites and the public, with what is perceived as China's designs on the Korean peninsula, especially in light of the PRC's growing power. The agreement on the start of the tours was set against a background of increasingly unfavorable South Korean views of the PRC, with many scholars pointing to the Goguryeo issue as the dividing wedge. As a result, more South Koreans have begun to view the ROK-U.S. alliance as a hedge against future Chinese hegemony. END SUMMARY.

ROK Elite and Public Opinion Shifts Against PRC

¶2. (C) The urgent implementation of the Mt. Baekdu tours points to a larger shift in ROK-PRC relations. While the U.S. has improved its public image in South Korea since 2003, the PRC's image has taken a nosedive since the Goguryeo Dynasty first became a hot-button issue in 2004. Polling data provided by the Office of Research show a somewhat consistent "favorable" image of the PRC of around 70 percent from May 2000 until March 2004, but then a steep decline to an average of approximately 50 percent from March 2004 to the present. More tellingly, the "unfavorable" image of the PRC increased from a consistent 30-percent level to around 50 percent. In addition, the volatility of the two figures in the past 24 months suggests an ambiguity of South Korean views toward the PRC. The hopes for the PRC as an Asian partner struggle against concerns that China will turn into an adversary. In other words, sentiments of the PRC being a friendly "brother" Asian nation have shifted to increasing worries that the PRC will turn out to be a "Big Brother" with designs on the Korean peninsula.

13. (C) A separate poll conducted by the Korea Daily on South Korean perceptions towards its neighboring countries plus the U.S. showed the same trend. In the latest survey of 1,000 South Koreans conducted in late August to early September of this year, South Koreans perceived the U.S. favorably to the tune of 61 percent, followed by China with 44 percent. This was a 12 percent decrease for China from the past year, and approximately a 20 percent decrease from the 2005 survey, when China had a 65 percent favorable rating, the highest for all neighboring countries. Media Research, which carried out the survey, analyzed that increasing perceptions of China as a threat contributed to the steady decrease in favorable perceptions toward China.

14. (C) Elite opinion also appears to be shifting toward the "China threat" paradigm. Kim Heung-kyu, Professor of China Affairs at MOFAT's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), stated that, in spite of the PRC's "charm offensive" via Track Two academic exchanges, Korean academics "could not trust" the motives behind the PRC's increasing outreach to ROK elites. Chung Jae-ho, Professor of International Relations at Seoul National University and another China specialist, said that he had recommended to ROKG officials that they draw certain "red lines" concerning the Goguryeo issue with China, and that the Goguryeo issue could not be downplayed as "merely academic." Specifically, the Chinese attempt to incorporate Goguryeo into their history robbed Koreans of their ethnic and national identity.

Yoon Hwytak, Research Fellow at the Northeast Asian History Foundation, took this a step further: if the Korean people of the Goguryeo dynasty could be considered part of the greater Chinese ethnic identity as claimed by the PRC through its Northeast History Project, this essentially meant that modern-day Koreans could be considered part of the greater Chinese nation. This would lay the foundation for a potential "swallowing" of the Korean peninsula by the PRC.

Mt. Baekdu Tours Counteract PRC Claims

15. (C) The ROK prioritized the implementation of the Mt. Baekdu project after the recent North-South Korea Summit because it wanted to counterbalance PRC efforts vis-a-vis the Goguryeo issue, according to Dr. Yoon Hwytak of the Northeast Asia History Foundation. Yoon mentioned that the Foundation was actively coordinating with Hyundai ASAN to increase the Foundation's access to the area for historical research and excavations. According to Yoon, myths propagated through the PRC's official version of the history of Changbai Mountain, as the PRC refers to Mt. Baekdu, will be corrected during the South Korean-operated tours of the Mt. Baekdu area. While the economic benefits were not insignificant, Yoon claimed that Chinese efforts to make the Chinese side of Mt. Baekdu an international cultural and tourist site were based on Chinese calculations to support historical claims to the area as an integral part of Chinese ancient history. This was seen as a provocation by Koreans -- both North and South -- who regarded Mt. Baekdu as the point of origin of the Korean ethnic lineage. (NOTE: According to Korea's traditional foundation story, the first "Korean" kingdom of Gochosun was established in the Mt. Baekdu area in 2333 BC. END NOTE) Yoon explained that the agreement at the recent inter-Korean summit to jointly develop the Korean side of Mt. Baekdu was based on the need to check Chinese historical, cultural, and potentially even territorial claims to the Mt. Baekdu area.

16. (C) Hyundai ASAN's Mt. Baekdu tour site would project in its initial stages to have capacity for only 200-300 tourists at any given time. The Mt. Kumgang project, in contrast, can currently accommodate more than 7000 tourists daily. The location, in the far northern part of the DPRK, is far from any other existing economic cooperation project, such as Mt. Kumgang or the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Hyundai ASAN is betting that South Korean tourists, including some that have visited Mt. Kumgang, will pay about USD 1000 for a

flight-lodging package to Mt. Baekdu.

Reasons for ROK Concern

17. (C) The Goguryeo controversy began in 2004 when PRC scholars at the state-funded Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), working to promote an idea of a "Greater China" national identity in what was called the "Northeast Project," claimed the Goguryeo kingdom as a part of the regional history of China rather than as a Korean kingdom. This created strong concerns in the ROK over fears that the "Greater China" nationalism, as demonstrated by the PRC's Northeast Project, might be used to justify expansionism into areas of historic Chinese dominance such as the Korean peninsula, according to Korean scholars. More than just the fear of Chinese territorial designs, the elimination of the larger Korean nation was perceived as a possibility if the Northeast Project was indicative of the PRC's strategy in East Asia. The fear of Korea being "swallowed" by China contrasted sharply with the former prevailing view that the PRC was becoming a benevolent power, more interested in business and commerce than territorial expansion. In light of these fears, Yoon said that the Korean internal debate over whether the U.S. or the PRC should be favored as the major partner country in the future had swung increasingly toward the U.S.

18. (C) Chung stated that the PRC's position on the Goguryeo issue injured Korean national pride, in and of itself a major thorn in ROK-PRC relations. While the border concerns stemming from the Goguryeo issue were real, the indignity of Koreans being cast as a subset, and by implication subordinate member, of the Chinese nation was itself a source of anger. This challenge to Korean national identity has contributed to the rechanneling of what had been anti-American energies toward a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment.

19. (C) Of least concern in the Goguryeo debate were the "academic" aspects, according to the South Koreans we spoke with. Scholars pointed out that academic accuracy alone would not be a major cause for such a heated debate, and emphasized that the issue was a political one.

PRC "Northeast Project" a Political Move

110. (C) Yoon claimed that the PRC's pursuit of a comprehensive national strategy to maintain control over its minority populations led to its creation of the Northeast Project, which provided state funds for research into Chinese claims to the Goguryeo dynasty. The Project reflected growing PRC concerns about Chinese citizens of Korean descent and their loyalty to the PRC, as well as the potential for North Korean refugees to flood across the Yalu River, Yoon said. Koreans were not the only target for such pan-national Chinese identity espoused by the Project; Yoon mentioned the Tibetans, Uighurs, and Hmong as other ethnic groups that the PRC was attempting to incorporate into such an identity. The ostensibly academic Northeast Project reinforced such an identity by asserting that all ethnic groups that lived in present-day Chinese territory were Chinese. The Chinese, Yoon claimed, were developing a historical argument in order to achieve political goals.

111. (C) The practical implications of the Project, however, went beyond internal stability and minority control. In the event of a political change on the Korean peninsula, the pan-Chinese identity argument would effectively halt the impact of such a change at the North Korean border. Furthermore, it would also provide a justification for intervention on the Korean peninsula in the event of a collapse of the North Korean regime or system, according to Yoon.

Background on Northeast Asia History Foundation

¶12. (C) The ROKG-funded Northeast Asia History Foundation began in 2004 as the Goguryeo Project. The think tank was a direct response to the PRC's 2004 launching of the Northeast Project. In 2006, the Goguryeo Project combined with scholars on the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo), Comfort Women, and other controversial "historical" issues to form the current Foundation. The Foundation will meet in December 2007 with its Chinese counterparts in Beijing in an attempt to build a Track Two dialogue on the Goguryeo issue. The Foundation has also formed partnerships with academic institutions at Harvard and Stanford Universities in what appears to be an effort to raise support for the ROK's position on the Goguryeo issue.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) During the 2007 Asian Winter Games in China's northeast city of Changchun, a group of South Korean athletes held up a handmade sign during the award ceremony proclaiming, "Mt. Baekdu is our land." Chinese netizens responded immediately with a parody picture with Chinese athletes claiming, "Mars is our territory." The dispute -- and the differing responses in Korea and China -- is a reminder that ROK-PRC relations will continue to be complicated by concerns and issues deeply entrenched in the region's history, culture, and ethnology. END COMMENT.
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